

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claim 1 (Currently amended): A method for working on a spine, said method comprising:

providing an apparatus ~~a retractor~~ having a distal portion and an expandable bladder coupled to the distal portion, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent vertebrae apart;

positioning the expandable bladder between the adjacent vertebrae; and

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart.

Claim 2 (Original): The method of claim 1, further comprising operating between the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 3 (Previously presented): The method of claim 2, further comprising operating between the adjacent vertebrae while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 4 (Original): The method of claim 2, wherein operating between the vertebrae comprises removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 5 (Original): The method of claim 4, wherein the tissue removed comprises the intervertebral disc.

Claim 6 (Canceled).

Claim 7 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 6, wherein the bladder of the retractor comprises repositionable rigid surfaces.

Claim 8 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder, when inflated, has a shape selected from the group consisting of curved and wedge-shaped.

Claim 9 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 6, wherein the bladder, when inflated, extends around a longitudinal axis of the retractor.

Claim 10 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is spread and arranged for spreading apart the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 11 (Previously presented): The method of claim 10, wherein the expandable bladder is sized and arranged for enabling removal of intervertebral tissue from between adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 12 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 7, wherein the bladder is formed as an accordion or as a wedge-shaped member.

Claim 13 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated at a pressure from 10 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 14 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 1, further comprising positioning a cannula between the adjacent vertebrae, wherein positioning of the retractor comprises introducing the retractor through a passage of the cannula.

Claim 15 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated without unconfined fluid introduced to the joint.

Claim 16 (Original): The method of claim 1, further comprising introducing instruments between said adjacent vertebrae to perform an operation.

Claim 17 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein positioning the expandable bladder comprises manipulating a rigid shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 18 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein positioning the expandable bladder comprises manipulating a flexible shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 19 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder comprises a polymeric material.

Claim 20 (Currently amended): A method for working on a spine, said method comprising:

positioning a cannula to access the spine;

providing an apparatus ~~a retractor~~ having a distal portion and an expandable bladder coupled to the distal portion, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent vertebrae apart;

introducing the expandable bladder through the cannula to access the adjacent vertebrae;

positioning the expandable bladder between the adjacent vertebrae;

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart; and

operating on the spine using an instrument introduced between the expanded vertebrae.

Claim 21 (Previously presented): The method of claim 20, further comprising operating on the spine between the adjacent vertebrae while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 22 (Original): The method of claim 21, wherein operating on the spine comprises removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 23 (Original): The method of claim 22, wherein the tissue removed comprises the intervertebral disc.

Claim 24 (Canceled).

Claim 25 (Previously presented): The method of claim 20, further comprising deflating said expandable bladder and removing the expandable bladder from the spine.

Claim 26 (Currently amended): The method of claim 20, wherein the expandable bladder is disposed at the distalmost end of the ~~retractor~~ apparatus.

Claim 27 (Currently amended): A method for working on a spine, said method comprising:

positioning a cannula to access the spine;

providing an apparatus ~~a retractor~~ having an expandable bladder, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent vertebrae apart;

introducing the expandable bladder through the cannula to access the adjacent vertebrae;

positioning the ~~inflatable retractor~~ apparatus between the adjacent vertebrae; and

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart.

Claim 28 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein the expandable bladder comprises a stretchable material so that it at least partially collapses when deflated.

Claim 29 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein the expandable bladder comprises a material which does not stretch.

Claim 30 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein inflating the expandable bladder pushes soft tissue out of the way.

Claim 31 (Original): The method of claim 27, further comprising introducing at least one instrument between the adjacent vertebrae and operating between the adjacent vertebrae with said instrument.

Claim 32 (Previously presented): The method of claim 31, further comprising operating between the adjacent vertebrae while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 33 (Original): The method of claim 31, wherein operating between the vertebrae comprises removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 34 (Original): The method of claim 33, wherein the tissue removed comprises the intervertebral disc.

Claim 35 (Previously presented): The method of claim 33, wherein the expandable bladder remains inflated while the instrument is introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 36 (Previously presented): The method of claim 33, wherein the expandable bladder is removed prior to or while the instrument is introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 37 (Currently amended): The method of claim 31, further comprising contracting the expandable bladder; and removing the ~~retractor~~ apparatus from the spine.

Claim 38 (Currently amended): A method to spread adjacent surfaces in a bone joint, said method comprising:

providing an apparatus ~~a retractor~~ having an expandable bladder, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent surfaces apart;

positioning the inflatable bladder between the adjacent surfaces in the bone joint;

and

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent surfaces apart.

Claim 39 (Previously presented): The method of claim 38, wherein the expandable bladder is positioned between adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 40 (Previously presented): The method of claim 39, wherein inflating the expandable bladder causes the expandable bladder to directly engage a surface on the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 41 (Previously presented): The method of claim 40, wherein inflating the expandable bladder causes the expandable bladder to engage surfaces on each of the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 42 (Previously presented): The method of any of claims 38, further comprising removing the expandable bladder after the adjacent surfaces have been spread.

Appl. No. 10/729,668
Amdt. dated June 23, 2005
Reply to Office Action mailed May 2, 2005

Claim 43 (Withdrawn): The method of any of claims 38, wherein a portion of the bladder of the retractor comprises at least one rigid surface.

Claim 44 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 43, wherein the bladder comprises a plurality of rigid surfaces connected by regions having differing degrees of resistance to straightening and flexing.

Claim 45 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 44, wherein the bladder is formed as an accordion.

Claim 46 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 38, wherein the bladder of the retractor has areas of rigidity interleaved with areas of more elasticity.

Claim 47 (Original): The method of claim 38, wherein the bladder is formed from a substantially inelastic material does not stretch when inflated.

Claim 48 (Previously presented): The method of claim 38, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated at a pressure from 10 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 49 (Currently amended): The method of claim 38, further comprising positioning a cannula between the adjacent vertebrae, wherein positioning of the ~~retractor~~ apparatus comprises introducing the ~~retractor~~ apparatus through a passage of the cannula.

Appl. No. 10/729,668
Amdt. dated June 23, 2005
Reply to Office Action mailed May 2, 2005

Claim 50 (Previously presented): The method of claim 38, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated without unconfined fluid introduced to the joint.

Claim 51 (Original): The method of claim 38, further comprising visualizing the space between said adjacent surfaces with a fiberoptic light and camera.

Claim 52 (Original): The method of claim 38, further comprising introducing instruments to a space between said adjacent surfaces to perform an operation.

Claim 53 (Original): The method of claim 38, wherein positioning the bladder comprises manipulating a rigid shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 54 (Original): The method of claim 38, wherein positioning the bladder comprises manipulating a flexible shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 55 (Original): The method of claim 38, wherein the bladder comprises a polymeric material.

Claim 56 (Original): The method of claim 38, wherein the joint is a knee joint.

Claim 57 (Previously presented): The method of claim 56, wherein the expandable bladder has a wedge-shape when inflated to separate surfaces of a femur and a tibia.

Claim 58 (Previously presented): The method of claim 57, wherein at least one wedge-shaped expandable bladder is inflated between the femur and the tibia.

Claim 59 (Currently amended): A method for enlarging a space between adjacent surfaces in a joint, said method comprising:

positioning a cannula to access the joint;

introducing a bladder into the joint through the cannula, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent surfaces apart;

inflating the bladder such that the bladder engages the adjacent surfaces and distends the joint to enlarge the space; and

removing the bladder from the joint.

Claim 60 (Previously presented): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder is inflated without unconfined fluid present in the joint.

Claim 61 (Original): The method of claim 59, further comprising visualizing the space with a fiberoptic light and camera.

Claim 62 (Original): The method of claim 61, wherein a fiberoptic scope is introduced through the cannula.

Appl. No. 10/729,668
Amdt. dated June 23, 2005
Reply to Office Action mailed May 2, 2005

Claim 63 (Original): The method of claim 61, further comprising introducing instruments to the space to perform an operation.

Claim 64 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein introducing the bladder comprises manipulating a rigid shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 65 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein introducing the bladder comprises manipulating a flexible shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 66 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder comprises a polymeric material.

Claim 67 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder comprises an elastic material so that it at least partially collapses when deflated.

Claim 68 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder comprises a substantially inelastic material.

Claim 69 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder remains inflated while the instruments are introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 70 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the bladder is removed prior to or while the instruments are introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 71 (Original): The method of claim 70, further comprising applying a vacuum to deflate the bladder prior to withdrawing the bladder.

Claim 72 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein inflating the bladder moves soft tissue out of the way.

Claim 73 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the joint is between two vertebrae in a spine, wherein inflation of the bladder spreads the two vertebrae apart.

Claim 74 (Original): The method of claim 73, further comprising removing a spinal disc between the vertebrae.

Claim 75 (Original): The method of claim 59, wherein the joint is in a knee.

Claim 76 (Original): The method of claim 75, wherein the bladder has a wedge-shape when inflated to separate surfaces of a femur and a tibia.

Claim 77 (Previously presented): The method of claim 76, wherein at least one wedge-shaped bladder is inflated between the femur and the tibia.

Appl. No. 10/729,668
Amdt. dated June 23, 2005
Reply to Office Action mailed May 2, 2005

Claim 78 (Currently amended): A method for working within a bone joint, said method comprising:

providing an apparatus ~~a retractor~~ having an expandable bladder, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread adjacent surfaces apart;

positioning the expandable bladder between the adjacent surfaces of the bone joint;

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent surfaces to enlarge a working space in said joint; and

operating on the joint using an instrument introduced into the enlarged working space.

Claim 79 (Previously presented): The method of claim 78, further comprising removing the expandable bladder after the joint has been operated on.

Claim 80 (Canceled).

Claim 81 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the joint is a knee joint.

Claim 82 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the joint is between adjacent vertebrae in a spine.

Claim 83 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein operating on the joint comprises removing tissue or bone.

Claim 84 (Previously presented): The method if of claim 82 83, wherein the tissue comprises a spinal disc.

Claim 85 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 78, wherein a portion of the bladder of the retractor comprises at least one rigid surface.

Claim 86 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 85, wherein the bladder has a plurality of rigid surfaces connected by regions having differing degrees of resistance to straightening and flexing.

Claim 87 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 86, wherein the bladder is formed as an accordion.

Claim 88 (Withdrawn): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder of the retractor has areas of rigidity interleaved with areas of more elasticity.

Claim 89 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder is formed from a substantially inelastic material.

Claim 90 (Original): The method of claims 78, wherein the bladder is inflated at a pressure from 10 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 91 (Currently amended): The method of claim 78, further comprising positioning a cannula between the adjacent vertebrae, wherein positioning of the inflatable ~~retractor~~ apparatus comprises introducing the ~~retractor~~ apparatus through a passage of the cannula.

Claim 92 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder is inflated without unconfined fluid introduced to the joint.

Claim 93 (Original): The method of claim 78, further comprising visualizing the space with a fiberoptic light and camera.

Claim 94 (Original): The method of claim 93, wherein a fiberoptic scope is introduced through a cannula.

Claim 95 (Previously presented): The method of claim 78, wherein positioning the bladder comprises manipulating a rigid shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 96 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein positioning the bladder comprises manipulating a flexible shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 97 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder is composed of a polymeric material.

Appl. No. 10/729,668
Amdt. dated June 23, 2005
Reply to Office Action mailed May 2, 2005

Claim 98 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder remains inflated while the instruments are introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 99 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein the bladder is removed prior to or while the instruments are introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 100 (Previously presented): The method of claim 99, further comprising applying a vacuum to deflate the bladder prior to withdrawing the bladder.

Claim 101 (Original): The method of claim 78, wherein inflating the bladder moves soft tissue out of the way.